



When They Can't Talk
Lives Are Lost



What Public Officials Need to Know

***This brochure is a collaboration
of the following organizations.***

- ◆ Association of Public Safety Communications Officials International, Inc.
- ◆ International Association of Chiefs of Police
- ◆ International Association of Fire Chiefs
- ◆ International City/County Management Association
- ◆ Major Cities Chiefs
- ◆ Major County Sheriffs' Association
- ◆ National Association of Counties
- ◆ National Association of State Chief Information Officers
- ◆ National Conference of State Legislators
- ◆ National Criminal Justice Association
- ◆ National Governors Association
- ◆ National League of Cities
- ◆ National Public Safety Telecommunications Council
- ◆ National Emergency Management Association
- ◆ The Council of State Governments
- ◆ The National Sheriffs Association
- ◆ The United States Conference of Mayors

Did You Know?

You grew up watching cop shows on television. When the police were in trouble, they could pick up the radio anywhere, anytime, and help would instantly arrive. Would you be surprised to know how often this could not really happen? We all watched in horror as the second tower of the World Trade Center collapsed. Did you know that police received the radio message that the building was going to collapse, but firefighters never received that message because they use different radios?

- ◆ Did you know that the police, EMS teams, and firefighters sometimes have to juggle as many as five different radios because each agency communicates on different systems?
- ◆ Did you know that first responders had to use runners to carry messages from one command center to another in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing because they didn't have common radio systems?
- ◆ Do you know how often agencies cannot talk to each other or to agencies in their neighboring cities, counties, or States?



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◆ Is yours one of them?

While events of the magnitude of 9/11 or Oklahoma City don't occur every day, there are many daily events that require different agencies and different jurisdictions to be able to communicate with one another. Incidents such as traffic accidents, fires, high-speed chases, rescues, chemical spills on the highway, and missing children do occur every day and they can occur anywhere. These incidents occur with frightening regularity. When they occur in your community, will your agencies be able to talk to each other?

Why Can't They Talk?

Public safety agencies historically have depended upon their own stand-alone radio communications systems and they are often incompatible with one another. There are not only different systems for different agencies within one community, different jurisdictions maintain their own systems, too. There are 2.5 million public safety first responders in the United States working for 18,000 State and local law enforcement agencies, 26,000 fire departments, and over 6,000 rescue departments, plus Federal law enforcement and other agencies, such as, transportation and the public utilities who need to talk to one another during critical incidents.

Why Is This Important To You?

The public looks to you—their elected and appointed officials—to provide basic public safety, and guidance and management during a crisis. That same public will praise your successes and hold you accountable for your failures. You are responsible for making critical funding decisions using scarce taxpayer dollars. You understand the political dynamics in your community and in the surrounding jurisdictions.

Ultimately, public safety is a core function for governments and adequate public safety radio communications are essential. You need to understand the current status of public safety radio communication systems in your community—its capabilities and limitations and plans for upgrading or replacing those systems. If your public safety agencies cannot communicate directly with each other by radio to coordinate life-saving activities, inevitably some lives will be lost. What can be done?

Interoperability. What Is It?

Interoperability is the ability of public safety agencies to talk to each other via radio communication systems—to exchange voice and/or data with each other on demand, in real

time, when needed. Most people assume that public safety is already interoperable. In many cases, public safety officers can't even talk to their own agencies. To make interoperability a reality, public safety first needs mission-critical radio communication systems that provide reliable, agency-specific-law enforcement, fire, EMS-communications. (Mission-critical radio communications are those required during critical times, when communication is absolutely necessary, such as when life or property is at stake.)

Why can't they just use cell phones

Unfortunately it's not that simple. Although public safety use of cellular phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and other commercial wireless devices and services has grown, these devices are currently not sufficiently suited for use during critical incidents.

Public safety officials have unique and demanding communications requirements. They need dedicated capacity and priority access that is available at all times to handle unexpected emergencies. They need highly reliable

Why Isn't Public Safety Already Interoperable?

Four key reasons. Incompatible technology, limited funding, inadequate planning, and inadequate and poorly managed radio spectrum.

- ◆ Different jurisdictions use different equipment and different radio frequencies that can't communicate with each other, just as different computer operating systems won't work together or an AM radio won't receive an FM signal.
- ◆ There is limited funding to replace or update expensive

and redundant networks that are engineered and maintained to withstand natural disasters and other emergencies. They need complete coverage within a given geographic area, with no dead zones. And, they need unique equipment designed for quick response in emergency situations—dialing, waiting for call connection, and busy signals are unacceptable during critical events when seconds can mean the difference between life and death.

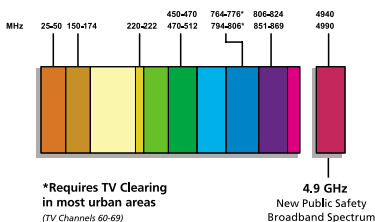


communications equipment, and different communities have their own budget cycles and funding priorities.

- ◆ The human factor—agencies are reluctant to give up management and control of their communications systems. Interoperability requires a certain amount of shared management, control, and policies and procedures.
- ◆ There is a limited and fragmented amount of radio spectrum available to public safety and available radio spectrum has been poorly managed.

What Is Radio Spectrum?

Public Safety Radio Spectrum Bands



It is electronic real estate—the complete range of frequencies and channels that can be used for radio communications. Spectrum transmits electronic signals—it is the highway over which voice,

data, and image communications travel. It might surprise you to know that radio spectrum, one of our Nation's most valuable resources, is a finite resource—what exists today is all there ever will be.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has allocated certain frequencies or channels to public safety, but it is inadequate and scattered widely in 10 discrete bands across the spectrum, making it difficult for different agencies and jurisdictions to communicate.

How Can I Help My Constituents and Colleagues Understand the Importance of Interoperability?

Your role as a public official provides you the unique opportunity to take the initiative. You need to educate your constituents and colleagues about the importance of an interoperable public safety communications system that will make it possible for local, State, and Federal public safety agencies to talk to one another, to coordinate life-saving operations, and to provide a basic level of public safety.

Our perceptions are shaped by the news shows and articles, movies, and television that tell a different story from the true state of public safety communications. The public that reads news stories about computers in patrol cars, amazing life-saving



This is a job that requires policy-makers across jurisdictions to work together for the common good—to plan, fund, build, and govern interoperable public safety communications systems.

technologies in rescue vehicles, and the latest state-of-the-art dispatch center may find it difficult to believe that their public safety agencies cannot talk to one another.

This is a job that requires policymakers across jurisdictions to work together for the common good—to plan, fund, build, and govern interoperable public safety communications systems. Policymakers at all levels need to collaborate to develop radio communications interoperability for emergency response and incident prevention. It begins with a dialogue among the stakeholders in your community.

How Do I Learn Whether or Not Public Safety is Adequate and Interoperable in My Community?

The basic questions to consider are: What types of emergencies typically occur in your community and which public safety agencies would respond to each of them? Some incidents like traffic accidents occur daily. How about major crimes like bank robberies or large-scale fires or natural disasters like hurricanes? Who needs to talk to one another every day? Who should be in communication in the first eight hours of

an emergency? Who will need to be added to that initial group if the emergency continues for longer than eight hours or more?

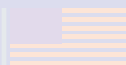
There are assessment tools that can be used to determine the level of interoperability in your community. Once you know the answers to these questions, you need to assess your resources. For example, what existing communications infrastructure such as radio towers does your community already have? What financial resources are budgeted for public safety communications?

How Much Will It Cost?

There are several issues to consider—how much will it cost if you *don't* develop interoperability in your community and what are you and others in your area *already* spending on public safety communications? The nationwide investment in radio systems and supporting infra-

“ *The task force brings local and State elected and appointed officials together with representatives of the public safety community to develop national strategies for solving this critical public safety need.* **”**

*Harlin McEwen, Chair,
International Association of Chiefs of Police
Communications Committee*



structures is already substantial. As agencies replace aging equipment and adopt new technologies, the amount of money invested in communications equipment will continue to grow.

Improving interoperability does not necessarily require new spending — planning for interoperability can be incorporated into the process of replacing and upgrading radio communication systems. Individual costs will depend on the state of communications in your community and which short- and long-term direction your community chooses to follow.

How Can My Community Achieve Interoperability?

I nteroperability begins with leadership and partnerships. It begins with open, equitable discussions among all the stakeholders. Look beyond turf concerns and focus on partnerships for the greater good. Develop a common voice to facilitate budget and policy decisions. Strength in improving interoperability is built by working together with agencies and jurisdictions that have traditionally been viewed as competitors for scarce dollars.

Before developing the solution, define the problem by performing a complete assessment of your current

“We are working to get beyond the technical jargon to develop a commonsense language that the average person can understand. Quite simply, our task is to find ways to achieve real time communication between different communities, jurisdictions, and responders so we can save more lives in a crisis.”

*Vicki Barnett,
Council Member
Farmington Hills,
Michigan*

state of communications. Understand what your first responders need. Planning includes policies and procedures, building a governing structure, and identifying potential resources and funding.

This is not a simple problem and there are no simple solutions. There are short- and long-term strategies for improving interoperability—some involve improving coordination and cooperation among responding agencies and jurisdictions and can be implemented with limited additional cost. Other strategies require longer term planning and implementation of new systems, policies, and operating procedures. Expectations need to be realistic, solutions take time.

Where Can I Learn More About Interoperability?

A guide collectively created by a task force of national associations representing public officials at local and State levels, entitled, *Why Can't We Talk? Working Together to Bridge the Communications Gap to Save Lives*, begins to answer these questions and more. It includes, *Why Can't Public Safety Talk?* a discussion of the barriers to interoperability—the lack of coordination and cooperation, incompatible and aging communications equipment, limited and fragmented plan-

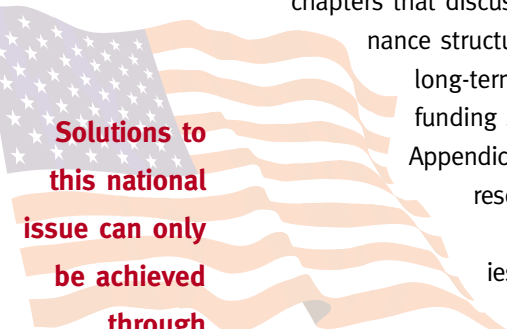


“Imagine a different public safety communications future. A future where emergency responses are coordinated, where information is shared in real time, where precious minutes are not wasted, and where emergencies are handled more effectively and safely.”

*Judi Wood, Chief
Information Officer,
Maryland Department
of Public Safety and
Correctional Services*

ning and funding, and limited communications spectrum. *Are You Prepared?*, provides an assessment tool and examines communication system and financial resources. *How Can My Community Achieve Interoperability?*, comprises several chapters that discuss planning, governance structures, short- and long-term strategies, and funding strategies.

Appendices include resources, assessment tools, case studies, articles on interoperability, and outreach tools.



Solutions to this national issue can only be achieved through cooperation between all levels of government.

Working Together

The inability of our public safety officials to readily communicate with each other threatens the public's safety and often results in unnecessary loss of lives and property. Recognizing that solutions to this national issue can only be achieved through cooperation between all levels of government, 17 national associations representing elected and appointed and public safety officials formed the National Task Force on Interoperability (NTFI) to address this issue.

The task force met several times over the course of 2002 to engage in an interactive dialogue on communications interoperability. The discussions provided an opportunity for public policymakers to partner their efforts with those of the public safety community to address interoperability issues in a more comprehensive way. As a result of this dialogue, NTFI developed a guide for public officials to raise awareness about the importance of interoperability. It provides the basic information necessary to understand the impact of this issue on their constituencies and guidance about the initial steps that should be taken to develop interoperable public safety radio communication systems.

It is hoped that this guide will serve as a catalyst for public officials to begin other, continuing dialogues with public officials in their localities, regions, and States. The National Task Force on Interoperability and its corresponding guide was supported by the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) AGILE [Advanced Generation of Interoperability for Law Enforcement] program. ■

“Fire and rescue departments from different jurisdictions routinely work together to provide emergency services to the public, but they cannot always communicate with one another. It is critically important that the entire fire and emergency services community support the need for improved communications interoperability and additional spectrum. State and municipal officials and the organizations that represent them nationally, working with emergency first responders, are an integral part of this significant effort to improve interoperability.”

Chief Randy Bruegman
President,
International
Association of Fire
Chiefs

Why Can't We Talk? Working Together to Bridge the Communications Gap to Save Lives is supported by the following major associations for local and State elected and appointed officials and public safety officers.

For more information and to obtain a copy of this guide, please visit www.agileprogram.org/ntfi.

